"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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Agriculture As a Way of Life**

The Jewish Point of View

By Dr. Gabriel Davidson*

The association of the terms Jew and farming may sound strange. Most people still believe that, since their dispersion from their ancestral home, Jews have been so completely severed from the land that in all the intervening nineteen hundred years they have not been able to thrust new roots into the soil. The truth is that during the whole Diaspora there was never a time when Jews somewhere were not engaged in farming to some extent. That more did not follow the plow was due largely to the fact that the lot of the majority of Jews was cast in countries where proscription against ownership of land and other restrictions barred access to the soil. Circumstance, not inclination or aptitude, forced them into occupations which did not necessitate a firm anchorage and which would enable them, when oppression became unbearable, to pull up stakes and move onward. When restrictions were lifted, Jews began to give vent to the agricultural urge. If the number on the land is still proportionately small, it must be remembered that it is by no means easy to undo habits shaped during these many centuries. Yet the Jewish agrarian population today is larger than most people suppose. Estimates lately made point to a world Jewish farm population of about 800,000. There is probably no country where Jews reside in which some are not occupied with agricultural pursuits. In this country there were Jewish farmers as far back as colonial times and there are today, according to latest estimates, eighty thousand Jews who derive their livelihood in whole or in part from farming or related agricultural pursuits. There are Jewish farmers in every state in the union and there is no branch of agriculture which has not its Jewish votaries.

It is no new philosophy to assert that farming is more than an occupation out of which to earn a living. The true devotee of farming conceives it to be--what it really is--a way of life. The very life of the early Jewish husbandman revolved around his fields and flocks. From Genesis, through the whole of the Scriptures, the Bible is replete with allusions to agriculture. When the patriarchs wandered from Ur to Mamre, from Mamre to Beer Sheba, thence to Padan-Aram, they wandered in search of land fertile and well watered to support their flocks and herds. The land and the things pertaining to it permeate much of early Jewish thought, and the pastoral note runs through much of Jewish writing from the Pentateuch to the Chronicles, through its song, poetry, proverb and prophecy. The Lord's promise to Israel is the promise of "a land flowing with milk and honey." Blessings are invoked in agricultural metaphor. Isaac blesses Jacob with the prayer "God give thee of the dew of heaven and of the fat places of the earth and plenty of corn and wine." And, before their entrance into the promised land, Moses admonishes his people to walk in the paths of righteousness so that God "may give the rain of your land in its

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season, that thou mayest gather in thy corn and thy wine and thine oil, and I (God) will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle and thou shalt eat and be satisfied." And, conversely, in agricultural metaphor, Moses warns the children of Israel against turning aside lest "He shut up the Heaven so there shall be no rain and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord giveth you."

Ethical and religious practices prescribed in the Bible are tied to agriculture. The corners of the fields are to be left ungarnered, the sheaves that slip from the gatherer's hands are to remain on the ground, the grapes and the olives hanging on the trees after the first harvesting are not to be picked. All these are for the "stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow."

What a depth of compassion for man and animal is revealed in the injunctions, "No man shall take the mill or the upper millstone to pledge; for he taketh a man's life to pledge," and "thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth the corn." What a profound social philosophy underlies the principle of the year of Jubilee that "in all the land of your possession ye shall grant a redemption for thy land because the land is Mine" (God's). This is the principle which governs the tenure of land acquired by the Jewish National Fund in Palestine. Only the use of the land is alienated; the land itself remains the perpetual possession of the Jewish people.

The first two kings of Israel were sons of the soil, Saul and David. Only one steeped in the spirit of the land could pour forth his soul in the sublime words of David's Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul." And only one close to nature and understanding nature's manifestations could produce the magnificent 104th Psalm.

The three important Jewish festivals--Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles--are fundamentally harvest festivals, and the minor festival in the Jewish month of Shebat is known as the "New Year for Trees" when the trees in the Holy Land begin to bud. So big a role does farming play in the life of the ancient Hebrew that the whole of one of the six sections of the Talmud is devoted exclusively to agriculture in its manifold phases.

If I have gone into the records of the distant past, it is to show that agriculture is a distinctive element in the framework around which Jewish law, Jewish philosophy, Jewish religion were built. And if farming was a way of living for the ancient Hebrew, so it is for the agrarian Hebrew of our time. What is it that causes the urban Jew to become a farmer, to tear himself loose from his anchorage in the city, to venture upon untrodden paths, to reshape the course of his life, if not the irresistible call to the land, the rekindling of the spark that lay smouldering but was never extinguished. Economic motivation there is, but it is not the sole factor. Surely the Jew who has become so thoroughly urbanized can find in the city financial rewards equal to those he can look for on the farm. The Jew who today casts his lot on the land does so because he expects to find there compensations which city life denies him and satisfactions which country life only can give him.

Who is the Jewish farmer of today? Whence does he come? How does he live? Does he stick to the farm?

The American Jewish farmer is yet largely the immigrant Jew transplanted from Europe to America and then from American city to American farm, one trans-

plantation superimposed upon the other, with all the adjustments and orientations that these transformations entail. Save for the second generation which is now growing up he is not indigenous to American soil. A sociological survey made by the Jewish Agricultural Society three years ago of a representative cross-section of Jewish farmers in seventeen states disclosed that only 4 per cent are natives. But the same study showed that 81 per cent had been in this country twenty years or more. It revealed also that 83 per cent are citizens and 3 per cent declarants--striking evidence that the Jewish farmer does not long remain an alien but rapidly becomes part and parcel of the American body politic.

From what walks of life do Jewish farmers come? They are recruited from a large diversity of occupations: common labor, skilled trades, white collar occupations, business and manufacturing and even professions. The needle and fur trades make up the largest group. More than half had gained some farm experience--at school or college or through actual farm work--in preparation for their new calling. They are drawn mostly from the modestly circumstanced class. Some started their farm ventures on the proverbial shoestring and less than 60 per cent of the group surveyed could boast of accumulations reaching up to two thousand dollars. Yet the Jewish agrarian population is not made up of urban failures. The immigrant Jew who comes to our shores practically destitute of means and is able to lay by even a small nest egg must have achieved some measure of success in his city work.

What force drove these folks farmward? I give some of their own answers. "To seek a quiet life." "To live close to nature." "To be independent." "Realization of life's ambition." "Tired of city life and working in the shop." A fifty-six year old man assigned as the reason the fact that there is no room for people of his age in the city. Grouping the replies under three main headings, it was found that 13 per cent went into farming because of health considerations, 18 per cent for economic reasons; the others--the largest number--were impelled by the longing to exchange the restraints and inhibitions of the city for the peace and serenity of the country. Indeed, some gave up lucrative city positions and paying businesses to satisfy their craving for farm life.

How does the Jewish farmer live? Many still picture the farm as drab and dreary and the farmer's life as crude and primitive. Yet our survey shows that seventy-six per cent of the farms have sanitary plumbing, eighty-two per cent electricity, fifty-two per cent furnace heat. This is much higher than the average for American farms, owing partly to the fact that Jews had become accustomed to these conveniences in the city, and partly because some farmers cater to summer boarders as an adjunct to their farm operations. Sixty-nine per cent have telephones, eighty-two per cent radios, sixty-nine per cent own passenger automobiles--again high figures.

The Jewish farmer is a man of social tendencies. The majority of those questioned belong to organizations--not a few to several. These include farmers' organizations of various descriptions--both Jewish and non-sectarian--synagogues, fraternal societies, lodges, labor unions, and cooperative associations. Jewish farmers are contributors to the support of local philanthropies as well as to the large Jewish agencies, such as the Zionist Organization, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Ort, the Hadassah and others.

The gregarious instinct of the Jew explains his tendency to settle in or near places that already contain Jewish farm groups, though there are lone spirits to whom proximity to urban centers or propinquity to Jewish neighbors is of no concern. The desire to live close to other Jewish farmers has, however, more than a social motivation. For the conforming Jew it is almost a matter of religious necessity.

Jewish religious law requires the presence of ten men as a minimum unit for public worship. It prohibits riding on the Sabbath day. The dietary laws and other ritual practices are difficult of fulfillment in isolation.

Particularly difficult is the matter of religious instruction for Jewish farm youth. The facilities for religious education are as yet inadequate. This is understandable. Christian farmers have, I take it, the same problem even if not in the same degree. Their churches and their religious organizations have come to them as legacies from former generations. Jewish farmers have no such heritage. They must build for themselves--no easy task for a pioneer generation. Jewish farmers who live close to towns and villages attend worship and participate in Jewish life there. In the small community they assemble in the home of one of their members, if not weekly, at least for festivals, holidays and special occasions. The larger Jewish farm communities have their own synagogues and community centers. Less than a month ago I participated in the dedication of a new center building at Perrineville, New Jersey, in a community that already had a synagogue, the ceremony of the burning of the mortgage on which I witnessed six years ago. Christian neighbors attended the dedicatory exercises in large numbers and contributed liberally to the building fund.

A gathering of this composition would naturally be interested in Jewish-Gentile relationships on the farm. I give the farmers' answers to the question: "How do you get along with your non-Jewish neighbors?" "Fine," "Excellent," "First rate," "Swell," "Tip top," was the general tenor of the replies. Over 90 per cent of the surveyed group vouchsafed that they lived in amity with their Christian neighbors. The survey shows that Jewish farmers have been elected and appointed to official positions in their respective communities, such as member of the school board, justice of the peace, member of fire or police department, town supervisor, deputy sheriff. I am sure it is satisfying for you to learn that Jewish farmers have entered sufficiently into the life of their respective communities to break down the artificial fences that divide people of different origins.

Earlier in this discussion I asked the question: "Does the Jew stick to the farm?" Let us take another glance at the survey. It shows that 13 per cent had been on their farms less than five years, while 69 per cent had been on their places over ten years, 22 per cent over twenty years. Some agricultural recruits drop out early because of insufficient capital, injudicious choice of the farm, general ineptitude, or unforeseen exigencies. Making allowance for these and keeping in mind the youth of the movement, the fact that almost 70 per cent have been on their farms over ten years--and a man who has spent ten years on the farm is likely to stick--is a fairly good indication that the Jewish farmer is not an ephemeral being like the flower that sprouteth in the morning and withereth at night. Over 80 per cent recorded definite advantages which they derived from farm living, and 90 per cent declared that they would rather be on the farm than in the city. Probably the large percentage in favor of the farm is attributable not so much to smug satisfaction with prevailing farm conditions, as to the realization that, with city conditions what they are, the farm is still the better place. While it cannot be established with statistical exactitude, it is my firm opinion that fewer Jews have been driven off their farms during the years of depression than out of their city jobs, city businesses and city homes.

The survey shows that 40 per cent of Jewish farm children had received a high school and 22 per cent a college education. About 15 per cent have gone into professional callings: law, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, engineering, accountancy, science, pedagogy and social work. There have gone forth from American farms Jewish boys and girls who have attained position and rank in varied walks of life. The brothers George and Gilbert Seldes, of journalistic fame, Judge Jacob Panken of our Court of Domestic Relations, Judge Theodore Rosen, recently re-elected to the municipal bench of Philadelphia, Joseph B. Perskie, Judge of New Jersey's Supreme Court and member of the Court of Errors and Appeals, Benjamin M. Golder, former Congressman from Pennsylvania, Solon Nathaniel Blackberg, research scientist at the Columbia Medical School, Jacob C. Lipman, the Dean of Rutgers College of Agriculture and Director of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station--are just a few instances picked from a long roster. All these erstwhile farm boys take pride in their farm background and attribute their rise to the rugged qualities which the regimen of farm living developed in them.

I have endeavored, as much as possible, to let you view Jewish farm life through the eyes of those who are living it. Even if the picture I have given you may seem somewhat roseate, presented as it was by one who is both a loyal Jew and a staunch friend of farming, the fact remains that there is growing up in this country a sizeable body of upstanding Jewish farmers tilling America's fair acres and contributing their share to America's agriculture. To me, who has had a modest part in the American movement of the Jew to the farm, the task of turning the Jew to farming has a wider significance than helping an individual or numbers of individuals, worth while as that may be. It is the thought of this larger implication that I want to leave with this assemblage. American Jewry is yet far too urban both in habitat and in occupational composition. That is not the Jew's fault. It is the result of circumstance over which they had little control. But this urbanization is responsible for the charge levelled against the Jew by the benighted but voluble minority that, because the Jew is not sufficiently engaged in primary productive activity, he is not a contributing force to the nation's welfare. I know full well that anti-Semitism is rooted in more than one misconception and I do not delude myself into believing that there is any one solution to this un-American and un-Christian preachment. Yet, I am firmly convinced that a sturdy, rugged, Jewish farm class, adding strength and balance to Jewish life, is a vital leaven in the cause of good will and better understanding.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, Jeremiah sent a message to his exiled brethren in Babylon exhorting them, "Build ye houses and dwell therein; and plant gardens and eat the fruit thereof.....for, in the peace thereof shall ye have peace." In the twenty-five centuries that have rolled by since these prophetic words were uttered, the children of Israel have gone forth to the four corners of the earth in quest of peace, but alas, have, in all their wanderings, seldom been able to find it. Here, in our blessed America, in a land that knows no barriers, where man is man, Jews have found that peace in home and field which Jeremiah visioned, and which all good Americans, Christians and Jews alike, wish them in full measure.

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